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## Invasive grass called threat to desert's plants, animals

**Diana Balazs**

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NORTHEAST VALLEY - Invasive non-native grasses like red brome, which fueled the "Cave Creek Complex" fire, not only are a threat to people and their homes but are changing the plant and wildlife ecology of the Arizona desert.

Researcher Cecil Schwalbe showed just how dramatic a change during a lecture Saturday that was presented as part of a program marking the 10-year anniversary of the northeast Valley's "Rio" fire.

The event was held at McDowell Mountain Regional Park north of Fountain Hills. Nearly two-thirds of the park's 21,099 acres burned in the July 1995 lightning-caused blaze.

Saturday's program also included a hike, and a talk by fire education specialist Alix Rogstad on protecting homes from wildfires by creating a defensible space.

"There are three or four (grass) species that are causing us some intense pain in our deserts," said Schwalbe, a herpetologist and ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. They include red brome, cheat grass and buffelgrass, he said.

Thirty years ago, if a patch of desert caught fire, areas would burn here and there in a mosaic-type pattern, said Schwalbe, adding that today the dried grasses continuously carry the fire, causing it to spread out of control.

He showed dramatic photos of past fires' impact on the desert along Arizona 87, the Beeline Highway, in the northeast Valley.

Upland desert once rich with saguaro, paloverde and desert scrub now looks more like a grassland, he said.

"The paloverde and the saguaro are the icons of the Sonoran Desert. It turns out, though, they are two of the most vulnerable plant species in the area," Schwalbe said.

Researchers are studying the impact of grass-fueled fires on desert wildlife such as the leopard frog.

Schwalbe showed photos of a cattail-lined deep pool of water in Saguaro National Park near Tucson that once served as a habitat for the leopard frog. But fire burned the desert vegetation, and that caused erosion when it rained.

That pool was filled in with 8 feet of sand. The frogs vanished.

"This was an effect of fire that just stunned us. We didn't think of it," Schwalbe said.

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